

COURAGE SHOWN THROUGH BLACK CANADIANS AND THEIR LASTING EFFECTS

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Canada is known worldwide for our diverse and accepting culture and atmosphere. We are a multi-cultural and welcoming country to all different kinds of people, with different religions, cultures and races, but it was not always this way. Specific, influential people have paved the way for our country and created an honourable name for us. As a young woman of colour living in this society today, I have learned many things from people from the past who have influenced me greatly. Martin Luther King once said, "I have a dream that one day little black boys and girls will be holding hands with little white boys and girls". This has become a reality for me and others around the world because of the sacrifices of him and many other individuals, allowing for people of colour to be accepted and appreciated for our diversity in this country.

An influential woman whom I admire greatly and has affected Canada's culture is Viola Desmond. She was born in 1914 to a large family in Halifax; one of fifteen children and was a very observant young woman. Her parents were very active in the black community and would often be involved in different social circles and organizations relating to black culture. Viola, as a child, noticed the gap between black and white. She often saw the lack of beauty products and advertisements directed to black youth. Despite the difficulty in achieving an education to become a beautician, Viola was adamant on her desire. She left Halifax for Montreal where she received training and also went on to New York to better her knowledge in the subject. Her decision to not let others stop her from achieving her dreams, despite the setbacks and rules working against her, proved her determination and persistence that continued in her lifetime. On one of her trips to grow and advertise her business, Viola had some spare time and decided to watch a film at the Roseland Film Theatre. During this period, she bought a ticket and took a seat on the main floor. Back then however, the main floor was reserved for only the white folk, leaving the balcony area for black people. The theatre staff demanded that she left the main area for the balcony as she couldn't sit with the white Canadians. Viola adamantly refused as she saw the injustice in this requirement. Upon her refusal, the police was called and she was dragged out of the theatre, injured in the process. She was arrested and held overnight without being advised of her rights.

Despite this obvious prejudice, Viola remained classy and sophisticated during her overnight stay in jail. She endured the night sitting upright with her white gloves on, keeping her composure and proving her class regardless of her setting and circumstance. She was fined \$20, almost \$271 back then, despite having been innocent and was also charged for defrauding the government for the difference in the tax between the main floor seats and the balcony seats even though she offered to pay the difference.

Her decision to fight the charges showed her courage and bravery. She was not going to sit around idly as her rights were infiltrated. Despite the several charges against her, her main concern was the racial discrimination the theatre showed. Another influential black figure, Carrie Best, was able to print Viola's story in the first edition of the Clarion, the first black-owned Nova Scotian newspaper. Through this, and with the help of her church and lawyer, Frederick William Bissett, Viola was able to raise awareness and support to her cause. She was able to showcase the discrimination and racism enforced on her. Despite initially losing her case because of the government's insistence of her attempt at tax evasion, Viola had started a movement. The African-Canadian population was in an uproar. Everyone saw the racial inequality and injustice that occurred.

Viola's refusal to follow the status quo and do as she was told gave way for great change. Naming her the "Rosa Parks" of Canada is a given, as she took a brave and demanding stand against what she believed was wrong. She refused to be another black face in the crowd, and through her effort and determination, she has become an influential role in equality and civil rights, not only in Canada, but for individuals around the world.

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